

## **TIPS ON PRODUCING DISSERTATIONS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH**

1. What follows are some introductory notes on dissertations, chiefly intended for undergraduates at Caius about to start into their second year and thus new to this kind of project; though they may also be useful as a reminder for more hardened survivors. By now you will already have developed a pattern for preparing an essay topic and then writing the essay as part of a weekly project, so that producing written work is a familiar task. Many of the writing skills and habits which are second-nature to you will assist you with making the jump to writing a dissertation. However there are three major differences between an essay and a dissertation, which will seem obvious but which have important consequences: a dissertation is longer, and is length-controlled; you have longer in which to plan and write it; and it is not informal like an essay, but is a formal examination submission. By formal is not meant impersonal or without imagination and conviction, but rather that points of view need to be justified and supported, by argument and evidence at least as much as by assertion of opinion, and duly set out in prescribed form.

2. For Part I of the English Tripos the submission of a dissertation, in substitution for one of Papers 2, 3 or 4, is optional. The reasons for taking up this option are fairly compelling: the intrinsic interest of a new kind of project, chosen by you and worked up in your own time; the reduction of stress in the exam period itself (one less paper to revise for, one less script to write); the fact that in the year following it will be compulsory to submit at least one dissertation, with the option of a second, so that some practice is useful. There is a slightly unusual temperament, however, for which this reasoning is not altogether conclusive: a person who is a deep-down dithering procrastinator and muddlehead who also finds that the last-minute adrenalin of the written exam finally does concentrate and clarify the mind and trigger off brilliance and insight and bravura performance. If you are one of these rare birds (both components are crucial), then you may need to pause; otherwise, you will sensibly opt for a Part I dissertation.

3. To guide you in the mechanics which follow on from choosing to submit a dissertation the Faculty produces a memorandum of guidance under the title 'Notes for Guidance on Dissertations in the English Tripos', which is (nominally) revised and updated every year. This Faculty memorandum summarises the regulations and in particular the deadlines for various events that must take place; these features of the memorandum repeat the contents of the current Regulations for Part I of the English Tripos and are compulsory and binding. There are also points of advice about style and presentation which represent some level of agreement about good practice; these features are not binding in the same way but are provided for guidance. Note for example that there is no binding rule about the number of supervisions which you may receive in preparing your dissertation, since the Faculty has no powers to legislate upon that point, only to suggest guidelines. The notes and suggestions which follow in this Caius memorandum are meant to be

complementary to all that is contained in the Faculty counterpart; if you are puzzled at any point about the contents of either document, or about apparent divergences between them, consult your Director of Studies for clarification. The Faculty memorandum also advises that you consult another document, 'Criteria used in Assessing Tripos Examinations', but only the excessively diligent or anxious need trouble themselves; that document is full of pious truisms, all utterly self-evident, just like this one.

4. First, some general comments. A successful dissertation needs an interesting and challenging subject. It needs a strongly focussed and developing argument. It needs to be written with vigour, insight, and activity of thought and judgement, so that the reader can sense that it is going somewhere and doing something, not merely reporting on thought already concluded or surveying materials in merely descriptive mode. If you plan this project well, and carry it through strenuously, it could turn out to be your very best and strongest work so far, extending your reach and finding new footings and giving you well-earned satisfaction. The challenge is an opportunity, just as the opportunity is also a challenge (*N.B.* Blairite motto, handle with suspicion).

5. But of course there are different kinds and modes of dissertation, depending on the nature of the topic and of the task that you set yourself. Some dissertation projects will range widely across diverse aspects, some will focus very exactly upon specific text materials; some will be comparative and draw insights from tracing similarities or connections. Some will address implications of historical or cultural context; some will examine linguistic and stylistic developments; some will overlap with performance considerations. Some topics will position themselves distinctly in earlier periods and will accept or challenge the conventions of period scholarship: medieval, renaissance and so on. Many dissertations will attempt to move from one kind of focus across to another in the course of internal development.

6. At the very start of considering your options you will most likely not be ready to make firm decisions, so that the project will entail working out your focus and purpose as you go along. This is one of the reasons why you will need the extended period allowed for working up a dissertation, and why you need to make an early start. At each successive stage you will need to re-consider your objective, and give yourself room to adapt to shifts as they arise from your own thinking or from the comments of your supervisor, or from the interaction of both.

7. Some considerations bearing on your initial choice of topic. First, make a start on this soon after you have cleared the concluding assignments of the Easter Term in your first year. Before you depart for the summer vacation you should if possible have an outline idea for a dissertation, and have reviewed this in discussion with your Director of Studies. This will enable you to form a first impression of whether the topic area or general idea seems generally workable, and to assign quality time for some large exploratory reading over the summer ahead. If you will need to borrow library books or acquire texts, plan ahead. It is good to read widely and closely before you seize upon a specific point of view or line of argument; otherwise your work will have a boxed-in feel to it, as if you made up your mind too early and too

insistently. By converse token, if you read only while lolling around and without clear aim, your thoughts may be hard to divest of their aimless origin.

8. Second, ponder the choice of possible topics from your personal viewpoint. It is sometimes a good plan to select an essay project you have already undertaken, but which threw up large or provoking unanswered questions or roused a particularly intense interest. Sometimes you may have encountered an area of literary or intellectual provocation through a lecture-series or from your own reading; sometimes you may be aware of latent ideas which you want to test by a full deployment, or you may want to challenge some familiar attitudes which you think may be vulnerable to close enquiry. Or there may be some commanding high peak which you have been wary of approaching in a hurry, biding your time for the right moment.

9. In accordance with regulations you will exempt yourself from sitting the examination paper in the period-area within which your dissertation topic chiefly falls. This means that you may wish to consider minimising your exposure to work in a period which you have not yet become comfortable with, by choosing a topic from within this period and thus escaping the examination; or you may wish to consider economising on period work not already completed, by choosing a topic from within that period and contriving to focus your other work for the period so as principally to funnel into your dissertation. Neither of these motivations is more than palliative. It is always better to select a topic-area because of positive aspects: because you are strongly interested, because you want to challenge yourself, because a new phase of your intellectual advancement could be instigated by an ambitious dissertation choice.

10. It makes a good start for the topic in view to be challenging. There are many topics which are familiar to examiners from year to year as worthy but more or less self-evident from the moment that their titles are written down. It is not that the topics are themselves trite: there is always room for lively new thoughts on old and familiar subjects. But an essay on Swift's sarcasm, or Herbert's piety, or Yeats's symbolism, or Marvell's irony, or Larkin's pessimism, or the compassion of the English war poets or the class-consciousness of Tony Harrison is quite likely to be going nowhere much, because the usual destination is round and round. By similar token the arguments about Thomas Hardy or Christina Rossetti or Angela Carter, and rather often too about Keats and Sidney and Lawrence and Johnson, are prone to lapse into sentimental, inert postures, clogged up with biography or publication history. The conclusions offered rather frequently about Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or Jonson's *Volpone* or about *Waiting for Godot* have a similar tendency to slide into very familiar slots. Fight flab.

11. A likewise familiar pattern is to concentrate on the output of a specific author, sometimes with particular reference to certain selected texts, and to work through considerations of historical context and critical assessment, supported by passages of detailed textual analysis, towards a concluding literary appraisal. This general formula is well-established but can also very easily slide into blandness. It will tend to emerge finally as a weekly essay simply expanded and interpolated with more detail, with an easy cycle of beginning, middle and end. A dissertation, on the other hand, is not just a

larger weekly essay, but has the possibility of working to a significantly different purpose and effect. Sometimes a simple question can open into far-from-simple consequences: why did Johnson write a dictionary, for example, or why is the compositional manner of 'Lycidas' so restless; what open doors did the writing of *Ash-Wednesday* effectively close; who were Shelley's readers during his lifetime?

12. Here is where you need to ponder the challenge of the extra length. A weekly essay can seldom accomplish a major internal development, except perhaps on the pivot of a single turning-point in its argument. But a dissertation can be staged out internally, if handled strongly and with controlled economy in its partitions, so as to work through a series of argued moves and component turns, exploring and testing a topic which is open to uncertainty or disagreement, so that each section of the accumulated discussion carries its force to turning-points and shifts of treatment, which themselves draw force from the sections which led up to them. This kind of more strenuous articulation will displace all temptation to padding or recycled argument, because you will need every inch of your extra space to make the space work productively for you, and to bring the stage-by-stage development to a coherent, persuasive conclusion.

13. To work up an ambitious dissertation topic like this cannot be done at a single stroke of last-minute compositional fury. You will need to proceed by building layers and component elements, allowing yourself time to challenge your own position and to open your discussion to internal doubt and question. What looked at the beginning like the body of the main idea may turn out to be only the starting point. Further reading will extend the range of your views and will thus alter them, requiring shifts and moves in your treatment. Once the central lines of argument have emerged your additional reading may become very sharply focussed: you will know what you are looking for. But the issues may become less clear, more complex, even so; and greater control will be needed to do justice to a weave of difficult argument while holding strongly to a confident conclusion.

14. To make this work you will need time to develop positive interaction with your supervisor. If you leave enough room in your schedule, he or she will be able to interject questions and challenges into your formulations before you have consolidated them too decisively; to suggest further reading which will extend your thoughts, to highlight your promising points while casting doubt on others; to foreground into consciousness your methods or argument or critical vocabulary so that you can in turn subject these to more focussed discrimination. Your supervisor is by custom not allowed to give a response to your final draft, which must be all your own work, but at intermediate stages of composition he or she can offer sometimes fundamental critique of construction, provided that you are organised enough to leave time and space for this to be productive. No supervisor will intervene radically if there is no time for this to be other than demoralising. And no supervisor will be enthralled to be supplicated for help at drastically short notice or during vacations.

15. Even if your work on the dissertation doesn't run entirely to your original planned timetable, don't treat your supervisor with discourtesy. This

looks rather obviously basic in cold print, but in the heat of balancing pressures from week to week you may begin to think of appointments with your dissertation supervisor as optional. Don't do this: you will mess up your own work plan and also annoy your supervisor, also curtailing the productive usefulness of the interaction. Keep your supervisor informed of your progress, don't just vanish until the last minute, present drafts in good time according to your agreements. Within the week in which you hand in your final dissertation a Caius undergraduate supervised by a non-Caius supervisor for a dissertation is also expected as a matter of courtesy and acknowledgement to send a brief written note of thanks (a witty card will do nicely); please be sure to remember this simple obligation (of which you will be reminded, nearer the time).

16. Another important aspect of planning your time is to leave intervals for the draft so far outlined and developed to lie fallow for a while, so that you can return to it with a fresh view. Even a week's break will enable you to spot weak links, slack arguments, near-repetitions and neglected opportunities. You will be able to annotate and critically review your own draft material, and trial-redraft bridge passages which define the overall shape of the project, as well as improving the detail and clarifying your style. You may be able to allow room for this self-critique to happen several times. Last-minute haste is the enemy of a phased development, and will leave you victim to the weaknesses of the one-shot weekly essay.

17. The official timetable is fully outlined in the Faculty memorandum. Briefly, the key dates are as follows. Your topic must be chosen and discussed with and approved by your Director of Studies in time for it to be notified to the Faculty Board by the penultimate Friday of Full Michaelmas Term; if there is any hitch in the topic as notified, as for example that it does not conform to regulations, you will be notified of this before the end of Michaelmas Term. If you later need to change or revise your topic you may do this, after discussion with and approval by your Director of Studies, in time for the changed topic to be notified by the day on which the Lent Term divides (the Division of Term). The completed dissertation must be handed in to your Director of Studies, under arrangements that will be specified well beforehand, by the second day of Full Easter Term, so that it can be formally submitted in your name by not later than 5.00 p.m. on that day.

18. Some practical notes and comments on the above. The restrictions on the range of topics to be permitted are outlined in the published Regulations for Part I and Part II of the English Tripos: in summary terms, for Part I dissertations the principal subject-matter is confined to literature in English of the British Isles; for Part II dissertations the subject-matter extends more widely to literature written in the English language, together with certain categories of work in certain foreign languages or in translation from them. Consult the current regulations, then confer with your Director of Studies as you ponder your choice. The word 'topic' is taken to mean the general subject-area or theme of a dissertation in fairly large or inclusive terms, leaving the precise form of the eventual title to be determined at a later time (up to the stage of preparing your cover sheet); but your eventual title must lie within the scope of the topic (or revised topic) as finally approved. It is good practice to make your 'topic' reasonably but not narrowly specific, thus

leaving room for some flexibility in choice of a more detailed 'title' in due course.

19. Concerning the staging-out of this process of preparation, the fundamental point to make is that you are in the business of development by layers and revisions, interspersed with critical scrutiny and advice. This process is thus radically different from the spurt to the finish-line of the weekly essay. Siege engines will be required. The whole task of preparing, working up, checking and revising a dissertation is made incomparably easier if done on a word-processor, preferably one under your own control and continuously accessible; a PC is fine but a laptop is ideal because you can take it home for vacations. Or, if there is already a PC at home, be sure that what you do here will work there as well.

20. Preparing the electronic game-plan it is sensible to organise at the outset a separate directory and filespace for the dissertation project, to devise filenames in numerical sequence to indicate layers of revision, and to devise or follow standard text-formats which will simplify the incorporation of quoted matter into text, the layout of notes and bibliography, etc. Aim for complete accuracy from the very beginning, otherwise small errors will spread about and become invisible, passing unobserved from version to version. If you download bibliographical matter or catalogue entries in connection with the project it is sensible to keep these on specific diskettes, labelled accordingly. It is sensible to have in view from early on the printer or at least printer-type from which your final product is eventually to emerge, so that what you want is what you get. Note here that in no circumstances whatever is it an acceptable excuse to ask for extra time at the last moment because some machine would not disgorge the results of your labours, or to blame bungled presentation upon the apparatus; nor may you blame your typist or keyboardist for delays which you consider to be not your own fault. You are fully and personally responsible for choosing the method of production, and for seeing it through by the due date.

21. Above everything, remember the nerd's golden rule: back up everything, all the time and at every stage, to separate diskettes or zipdrive etc., kept in a safe place; so that if your computing gear is stolen or struck by lightning five days before the submission date you will be inconvenienced but not devastated. Don't leave diskettes on radiators, don't mail unique copies through the post, don't expect PCs and Macs to lie down with each other, for your sweet sake. Remember that the staff of the Caius Computer Office are friendly and patient beings, and will help you to sort out tangles if you leave enough time.

22. If you plan your use of time with intelligent foresight you should be able to meet certain major staging-points, as follows. (a) By not later than the division of Michaelmas Term you should have a relatively clear idea of the general topic-area you are aiming for; you should have ventilated this with your Director of Studies specifically enough for the choice of a supervisor to be accomplished or within reach. (b) By the end of Michaelmas Term you should have met initially with your supervisor and reviewed both the intrinsic challenges of the topic and also the range of reading that you will need to address; by this stage you should begin to see a possible entry-point for the

discussion and some pivotal questions of text interpretation upon which some key stages will turn. (c) Over the Christmas break you should be reading with close determination, focussing on the central questions raised by your subject, and you should start to write up some major draft material; this will not need to be fully polished, nor in any way complete or worked out; but it should begin on the task of discussion and text analysis, and on the task of historical and critical argumentation, so as to assemble some coherent and extended passages in outline format.

23. (d) This vacation-work will then enable you, close to the start of Lent Term, to present some draft writing to your supervisor in readiness for an early supervision-session at which a fairly detailed and radical review of progress will be feasible. Don't regard this discussion as simply a consumer report on your efforts so far; get into active and lively debate, defend your arguments even as you concede your gaps and weaknesses, and try to get points of disagreement well out into the open. But take careful note, too, of all that is said, because this will be a major spur to further development. (e) If you keep working at extending and clarifying this material over the course of the Lent Term you should be able to budget for at least one further supervision session before the end of term, in which by then you should have ready for inspection a substantially worked up first-draft form of what is likely to be the dissertation in all its essential aspects; even if not yet fully polished up with all its references and bibliography and not yet refined down to the required length. Be sure that by now you have a specific title, which focusses your subject-matter and the central question or questions that you raise about it. Again, give your supervisor enough time to read and analyse your material, so that the discussion can be full and productive and can reveal to you very clearly what still needs to be done.

24. (f) This will leave you the bulk of the Easter vacation to review the near-final drafts, and to diagnose the backbone of your central argumentative structure. You may have prepared for yourself at an earlier stage a dissertation plan, to map out its component stages and inclusions; at this near-final phase of the work you may like to consider re-drawing a very summary outline, to assist in refining and cutting to length so that the internal stages and turning points of the argument are active and clear. In particular, keep asking yourself page by page how the discussion is actively springing from your title, bearing on it and opening it to analysis; as you approach the conclusion, again ask yourself what questions are being answered, what progression from the outset has been achieved, whether the final paragraphs connect up productively to the opening ones and give to the completed ensemble a rounded and active sense of purpose. If your penultimate draft is seriously over-length and stubbornly resists reduction, this is almost certainly because the internal sequencing is muddled and your priorities blurred.

25. At this point, a cautionary word. It is quite possible for a dissertation to have its origin in a lively and original idea, based on a fresh response to new challenges. But over the drawn-out stages of its drafting and development a dissertation can lose much of its spark and may start to decline into a routine exercise. The virus of a creeping academic malaise can then invade the organism, producing deadened forms of prudential fence-sitting; on the one

hand ... on the other hand; at first sight ... on more careful inspection; other critics have argued, however; beneath the casual witty tone an engaged seriousness of intent (never *vice versa*); and so on. Or the essay will gesticulate grandly and start to beat gongs: how could anyone preparing to sign off with a few concluding paragraphs on the Ode 'To Autumn' or 'Among School Children' or 'The Extasie' not switch on a purple streamer or two. The remedy is not to over-handle your drafts, especially when you are tired or distracted, or you will start to write like this almost without knowing it.

26. An associated caution. Don't let your dissertation work overshadow other tasks and interests, because you will have much else to do that will require fresh energies and fresh ideas, with texts to study and essays to write; possibly also, a portfolio to assemble. Assign specific portions of your time for the dissertation, and in the interim periods set it firmly aside, and work on other things. You will need some measure of discipline about this, and realism and sense of proportion.

27. (g) Finally, and in good time, give meticulous attention to how the finished work is presented. Because this is a formal composition and not just a trial essay, try to avoid casual colloquialisms and contractions, while also avoiding archness or pomposity. Check all the spelling and grammar, including the correct form of names, titles, foreign words (including all their accents); if you are citing medieval or earlier texts, some characters may have to be entered by hand. If grammar is not always your strong point, take a prudent glance into Michael Dummett, *Grammar & Style: For Examination Candidates and Others* (London, 1993) which is to be found in the Caius Library at Ref 808.042 D.

28. Concerning details of formal presentation, remember that the Caius 'Tips on Presentation of Essays' will already have outlined some good practice. However, the level of sophistication and protocol required for a dissertation is higher than what you have encountered so far. The Faculty's 'Notes for Guidance on Dissertations' gives, in Section B, various pieces of advice about format, titles and quotations, notes and references, and bibliography. These are, by and large, sensible. But remember that whether the title of a published work goes into single inverted commas or italics is determined not by genre but by the historic fact of whether the work in question was published as a separate work, with its own titlepage and pagination. Remember too that only barbarians of the most oafish hue will ever present lines of verse as if they were prose, separated by what is picturesquely called 'a diagonal stroke'; don't ever do this, unless (maybe) when you are quoting no more than a few words from the end of one line and a few words from the beginning of the next ('thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook', or 'I rather choose / To wrong the dead').

29. Advice in the Faculty memorandum about presentation of bibliographical entries and footnotes is well-intentioned but rather bullying and occasionally confused. The full protocol is laid out very clearly in the *MHRA Style Book: Notes for Authors, Editors, and Writers of Theses* (5th ed., London, 1996), copies of which stand in the reference section of the Caius Library (808.02 M). You will mostly not need the full rigour of advice there given on how to present notes and references in scholarly publications; but study the

main outlines and, above all, be accurate and consistent in your own practice. Bear in mind that the success of a dissertation can be materially affected by matters of presentation, and it may take you some time to master the details and adjust your formats. Try not to leave preparing and checking the bibliography and notes until the very last minute; indeed, if you can present some part of your draft dissertation to your supervisor together with some of its notes and bibliographical entries, even if incomplete, he or she will be able to guide you in the matter of what needs to be done to improve these formalities.

30. Remember that in providing references to sources used, either in notes or bibliography, it is not customary or necessary (despite contrary advice in the Faculty's 'Notes for Guidance') to give detailed acknowledgement to standard published works of reference (e.g. dictionaries: *OED2* is quite sufficient), or to ideas that have been floated and argued in lecture-courses or in debate with your supervisors. But take care also that you do not in a substantial way snaffle up ideas or information that are not your own, without acknowledgement; that constitutes plagiarism and is a serious offence. Remember too that in some cases the presentation may be enlivened and assisted by judiciously chosen and relevant visual material, photocopied within the A4 paper format; facsimiles of an original title-page, a contemporary engraved illustration, a page of original working draft or author-corrected proofs. Don't overdo this element and don't pursue it unless it could have real point; but at least the illustration will not affect the word-count (although the caption and source-reference will).

31. Your spell-check function will pick up impossible errors but will not save you from Jonson for Johnson or muddle over Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante; it will complain about hydroptique (as it should, since it's a false formation) but will let you print couldn't (which you probably shouldn't). Check all quotations and references for complete accuracy; check all text layouts for correct format. This advice is easily given, but may take an hour or two of patient attention to detail to follow through; but if you get simple things wrong, your readers (yes there will be at least two, apart from yourself) may lose all patience with your higher powers. Take care that your pagination comes out correctly. It may not be altogether obvious how to induce your apparatus to word-count each page separately, including any footnotes upon each page, but a wizz of slightly more advanced skills should be able to demonstrate; avoid mere wild guessing, which could be quite dangerous, and don't falsify your word-count totals. Be sure that the footnotes are consistently in accord with style requirements, keyed correctly to your text; that your bibliography is complete and the entries correct and correctly laid out. Occasional neat hand-written corrections are quite acceptable.

32. Be sure, too, that you do not even indirectly reveal either your personal identity or gender or your College of origin, since the marking process is conducted with strict anonymity. Remember that you have to provide a word-count; and also, on a separate sheet, a synopsis giving a clear summary outline of the whole dissertation. This synopsis must be not less than 100 and not more than 150 words, which allocation is not reckoned as part of the main word-limit for your dissertation; bear in mind that the synopsis counts as part of the examinable submission, so that it needs to be devised and

presented with care if it is not to risk incurring penalties.

33. Finally, following instructions for the handing-in arrangements which will be sent to you in good time, you must obtain a blank cover sheet and complete your section of it, having it ready with your final typescript for countersignature by your Director of Studies (Tutors are no longer directly involved in these *rites de passage*). Leave time to polish all these details of presentation and to overcome any last-minute hitches in the machinery, so that you can appear as required, exactly on time, to hand in your precious jewel for onward transmission to the Tripos Examiners.

34. As if the foregoing were not already enough, a final comment. This whole process may seem in prospect to present as a jungle of traps and restrictions, bundled about with red tape and dark warnings. But as you will discover, working up and writing a more extended critical essay, on a topic that interests you deeply, has its own natural rhythm. You will get into your stride with it and it will liberate some larger thoughts even as it focusses your mind on how to test and justify them. You will have your ups and downs but the sense of release and new opportunities for insight are a quite general experience. Just don't cramp yourself by serious mis-timing, and all the rest will follow along its natural course.

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1st January 2000

PDF file created on 25 April 2006